

Colonel Antoni Szuszkiewicz

Reconnaissance and Attack at Białycerkiew

On 1 May 1920, in Fastów [Fastiv], I received an order from General Sawicki, commander of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade, to carry out a reconnaissance in the direction of the towns of Grebenki [Hrebinky] and Biała Cerkiew [Bila Tserkva] and the task of seizing and holding, until new orders, the town of Grebenki-Saliwonki [Hrebinky-Salyvinky], 25 km southeast of Fastów. In private, the general mentioned that he was very anxious to occupy Biała Cerkiew before the arrival of General Romer's division. (Biała Cerkiew lay on the latter's axis of march).

The 1st Squadron of the 12th Lancer Regiment, which I commanded, was reinforced with a platoon and a section of pioneers from the 5th Lancer Regiment under the command of Lieutenant Mianowski and two heavy machine guns, so that with my own machine gun I had three HMGs and 100 sabres.

I set off from Fastów in the evening of 1 May. Marching through Kowalewka [Kovalivka] I reached Grebenki-Saliwonki in the morning of 2 May and found it free from the enemy. There I learned from the local population, who welcomed us kindly with bread and salt, that in the immediate vicinity the only place with numerous Bolshevik troops was Biała Cerkiew. I immediately sent Lieutenant Szuszkiewicz there for reconnaissance. In view of the fact that the horses were tired straight after the march, and it was about 20 km to Biała Cerkiew, i.e. 40 km there and back, I sent the patrol by cart. It was made up of several lancers dressed in civilian clothes, who had a good command of the Ukrainian language. In the quite flat and open terrain which stretched between the villages of Grebenki and Biała Cerkiew, this was the only kind of reconnaissance which could safely ensure the acquisition of the necessary information about the enemy during daytime.

Shortly after the reconnaissance set off, an ex-ensign of the Tsarist army appeared, declaring that he knew the strength and deployment of the Bolshevik troops in Biała Cerkiew and that he was ready to lead us there unnoticed, guaranteeing complete surprise of the enemy, and so success. According to him the Bolshevik forces were made up of an infantry regiment, not exceeding a battalion in size, the 54th Cavalry Regiment, with two squadrons, and an armoured train. Their mood there was panicky. Biała Cerkiew was guarded by posts only to the north and west, while from the east it was completely unguarded – so it had to be attacked from that side.

Of course, I accepted this information with due caution, but soon the improvised patrol under Lieutenant Szuszkiewicz returned from reconnaissance and confirmed the news. Although there was no precise information about the strength of the Bolsheviks, the presence of infantry and cavalry was noted, outposts and a patrolling armored train had been seen.

I decided to risk the occupation of Biała Cerkiew with my slim forces, counting on the defensive mood of the enemy and using the cover of night.

I immediately sent a report with all the details to General Sawicki and ordered preparations for a night operation, with the strictest possible secrecy.

We set off to Grebenki-Saliwonki late in the evening, taking the ex-ensign with me under a close watch. Before midnight I reached the area of hill 173 (2 km north of Biała Cerkiew). The night was dark, almost nothing could be seen. You could only hear the sound of a moving train and various noises from the town. Soon the train retreated east, to our great joy, and everything fell silent. I called for two volunteers who were to explore an uncovered path with the ensign. In the event of suspicious behavior or betrayal by him, they were to put a bullet in his head. I made the number minimal so that they could sneak by as quietly and imperceptibly as possible to find the path I needed. One of them, Lance-Corporal Napieraj, was successfully invested with the *virtuti militari*.

Time began to drag on in idleness, I started to worry about the fate of the lancers I had sent. After a good hour, we saw shadows approaching and met our three riders. The news was good. The patrol had found an unguarded passage, reached the main street and returned without being noticed. Immediately, because the moon was beginning to show itself from behind the clouds, I called a short combat briefing. We were to move as quickly and as quietly as possible along the known route to the town on horseback; in the event of



encountering patrols or shots, the men were to charge with as much noise and shooting as possible. Lieutenant Witold Jabłoński led with his platoon out front and just behind it the rest of the squadron. I ordered the platoon from the 5th Lancer Regiment with the section of pioneers to damage the track east of our route and guard our operation from the east against the armored train. A peasant was found near the mill by the railway track with information that the Bolshevik cavalry had recently marched and was quartered in the eastern part of Biała Cerkiew, but he could not say how much of it there was.

Soon, without firing a shot, we were on the main street. Dawn was breaking. On the right, a house with a lot of telephone wires caught my eye. I immediately ordered the wires to be cut and the switchboard to be manned. That is how we reached the middle of the town without the alarm being raised. There was a central square, with a brick market place. I hurried the squadron and it occupied the square, putting up machine guns in three directions along the street exits, and hiding the horses inside. I found myself as if in a fortress in the middle of the town. I now raised the alarm by ordering all three machine guns to start firing. After this wake-up call, our horse patrols moved out in all directions. Soon Bolshevik prisoners of war were brought in; among them was the regiment's adjutant and deputy commander, who Lieutenant Jabłoński recognised as his colleague from the cavalry school in Elizabetgrad, Staff-Captain Kandybę.

It was now getting light. At this time I received an alarming report from a southern patrol that the Bolshevik infantry, which could not move as quickly as the cavalry, had apparently become aware of our scant strength, and was beginning to show a lot of movement in Rosią, preparing a counterattack. The position was quite unclear. I sent a platoon over the Roś [Ros'] River and sent a quick report to General Sawicki on the capture of Biała Cerkiew and our position, asking for support.

However, in about half an hour my position became completely clear, and soon a patrol of the 8th Lancer Regiment appeared in the market square from the west, with Captain Pisula at its head. It was the leading unit of General Romer's division's main line of march. After I informed him of the situation, he set off immediately with a report to the following division. In less than an hour General Romer with his staff was in the marketplace, arriving by car. Major Piskor, the Chief of Staff, while dictating an operational order to the 6th Division, asked me several times how I got to Biała Cerkiew, since it was not on the projected line of advance for the 3rd Cavalry Brigade. I reported that I had orders to make a reconnaissance to Biała Cerkiew, and since it was possible, I took it.

Soon regiments of General Romer's division began to arrive from the west. Shortly afterwards, around 14:00 Major Kownacki with a squadron of the 12th Lancer Regiment and a horse artillery platoon arrived. I gave a report on the situation, relating it as above.



Order of the Cavalry Division L. 20/111.

Białocerkiew,¹ 3 May 1920. At 13.20.

- I. At 01:00 Białocerkiew was taken by a Squadron of the 12th Lancer Regiment. The enemy withdrew to the woods southeast of the town and to the suburb south of Rosią. There was enemy armour a few kilometers from the city.
- II. The task of 9th Lancer Regiment remains unchanged.
The 4th Brigade, to which the units of the 3rd Brigade in Biała Cerkiew are subordinated, is to patrol the area between Protoką and Rosią in an eastern direction today.
- III. The 5th brigade is to patrol the suburb south of Rosią and to secure a guard post which will stand at Alexandria.²
- IV. Apart from this, order L. 831 III remains in force.
- V. Accommodation is in the districts, with outposts.

Signed: Piskor for Romer

Major and Chief of Staff; Lieutenant General and commander of the Cavalry Division.

Confirmed: Czerwiński

Captain of the Staff (Stamp of 3rd Cavalry Brigade)

The episode described by then Captain Szuszkiewicz of the 12th Lancer Regiment is distinctive and highly instructive.

The background to the combat action was the task of reconnaissance.

The author did not discuss the act of reconnaissance, because there was no enemy. Only the will of the commander, aiming at a sharp reconnaissance of a big town, Biała Cerkiew, caused a number of orders from his side.

He studied it, using "disguised" men in the event, which was appropriate and gave results. Then, appreciating the demoralisation of the enemy, he decided, despite the unquestionable Bolshevik numerical superiority in Biała Cerkiew, to strike and capture that village, as his brigade commander had tasked.

The plan of action for the attack on Biała Cerkiew based on surprise is interesting! They make the description of this part of action especially interesting for the reader, showing at the same time that the war tactics cannot fit patterns! That each incident requires individual treatment, with the lucky intuition of the commander and an auspicious coincidence (an ensign in the Tsarist army) playing a significant role. In the end, this example, as well as all others, proves that in war luck favours the bold.

Editor

¹ The town's spelling in the original differs in the attached report from the article itself.

² The Oleksandriia area is an western suburb of the city now.

